

On Wisconsin Women: Working for Their Rights From Settlement to Suffrage

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On Wisconsin Women: Working for Their Rights from Settlement to Suffrage, by Genevieve G. McBride. History of American Thought and Culture. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993. xxiii, 352 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$43.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY KAREN M. MASON, IOWA WOMEN'S ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA LIBRARIES

"The careless world will probably continue to think that woman suffrage just happened, that it was 'in the air,' but we know that the changes in the opinions of society which made it possible are the result of ceaseless, unremitting toil" (304). So wrote Theodora Winton Youmans, editor of the *Waukesha Freeman* and the last president of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association, reflecting on the long struggle for woman suffrage. Genevieve McBride's *On Wisconsin Women* painstakingly chronicles the story of the woman suffrage movement in Wisconsin from the era of settlement through the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution granting women full suffrage in 1920. McBride calls her book "a case study of the campaign for woman's rights in Wisconsin" (xv), but it is primarily a study of the suffrage movement. Other reform efforts by Wisconsin women, such as abolition and temperance, are reflected through the lens of suffrage: how did they prepare women for the latter campaign? This perspective renders the discussion of the early reform movements rather flat.

The ten chapters of *On Wisconsin Women* can be divided into three parts. The first traces the emergence of women onto the reform scene through their involvement in the abolition and temperance movements and explores the links between the temperance and suffrage movements from the 1860s to the 1880s. The middle section of the book treats the emergence of women's clubs in the 1880s and 1890s and examines the municipal reforms undertaken by clubwomen, which McBride calls their "schooling for suffrage." Through the women's clubs the first generation of suffragists handed down strategies and tactics to a later generation. The final section focuses on the suffrage campaigns of the first two decades of the twentieth century, when women regained school suffrage, which had been won and lost in the 1880s, and waged a spirited but unsuccessful campaign to approve a full suffrage referendum in 1912.

McBride interweaves with this story the history of women journalists and women's newspapers in Wisconsin. This approach is somewhat problematic for the first section of the book, as McBride attempts to stitch together the outline of the early reform efforts from sketchy sources. The resulting narrative is uneven and difficult to follow. The narrative grows much stronger in the middle and last sections of the

book, when McBride focuses on the women's club and suffrage movements. The interweaving of the history of journalism with woman suffrage is also more successful here, largely because of the richness of the sources McBride had at her disposal for studying the suffrage movement, notably the regular columns written by Youmans, which provided an uninterrupted saga of the suffrage campaigns.

On Wisconsin Women is a significant contribution to the long neglected but slowly growing body of work on midwestern women's history. McBride explores the relation between the Wisconsin campaigns and other state campaigns, as well as the national movement. Suffragists in neighboring states, particularly Illinois, lent personnel, expertise, and resources to their sister organizations. A number of suffrage referenda took place in midwestern states in the 1910s in which women learned the techniques of mass persuasion, experimenting with publicity stunts such as street meetings, motor car tours, and suffrage movies. Women suffragists in Iowa appealed to the legislature for action on suffrage at each session from 1870 until the passage of the federal amendment. When in 1916 a suffrage referendum was finally held, it went down to surprising defeat, not unlike the Equal Rights Amendment referendum in Iowa in 1992.

Carrie Chapman Catt and Nettie Rogers Shuler wrote in 1923 that "the woman suffrage campaign in Iowa is remarkable for what it failed to achieve." The same could be said for Wisconsin and any number of states where women staged endless rounds of legislative lobbying and publicity campaigns only to be defeated at the polls. Often this was because of the covert but well-organized opposition of the brewers and distillers; in Wisconsin this opposition was a particularly potent brew. Temperance and suffrage had been linked from the start in Wisconsin; they remained so in the minds of the opposition, who feared that a vote for woman suffrage was a vote for prohibition. What women gained through the long struggle for suffrage was a political education, expertise in organizing and running campaigns, increasingly sophisticated knowledge of how to use the press to promote their cause, and a public voice. The role of women journalists in this venture was crucial: "Because they needed to win headlines as well as bylines, women also became expert in publicity, press agency, and other practices of public relations" (xvii).

McBride's book reminds us that the impetus for and locus of reform was not always the East Coast. This alone would make it a valuable contribution to our understanding of the suffrage movement. But it is also a timely book, published as we prepare to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, and a welcome addition to the literature on the woman suffrage movement in the United States.

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